*173 something whose strangeness places it outside our [24] understanding or what is worse, not to be deceived into interpreting this incoherent jumble simply to fit a preconceived theory.

*173 814 To these reflections of the native mentality must be added the deformations in the hands of the collectors of historical traditions (1): the dyeli among the Bambara. This word dyeli,

1. Here called "traditionists."

meaning "master," shows the esteem accorded, in principle, to the archivist, which is what each dyeli should be. Indeed the job consists essentially in preserving from oblivion the genealogy and in celebrating -- by magnifying them -- the achievements of the personage to whom the dyeli is attached. As a result, the dyeli extends his inquiries to all who come into contact with his lord, so that in fact he becomes the historian of an entire family, an entire clan and even an entire tribe.

[555] The dyeli's great erudition and, even more, his skill in making the most of his superficial knowledge bring it about that the esteem in which he is held takes the practical form of gifts -- often so considerable as to make the dyeli very prosperous indeed. Therefore, the majority of dyeli, being less anxious to safeguard truth than to increase their own fortunes, flatter or slander, as required, those on whom they impose their services, so as to profit as much as possible. It is because of this sort of corruption that the dyeli is often scorned.

Dyeli who have kept their integrity are rare; those who possess extensive knowledge and sufficient critical sense to make a wise selection from the mass of contradictory traditions are rarer still.

In general, each dyeli works only within the very restricted limits of a clan tradition, plus a few family traditions; he is entirely ignorant of anything that concerns neighboring clans and families and, especially, people outside his own tribe and race.

The dyeli preserves in his memory the historical tradition and hands it down. Thus, since each dyeli works entirely independently, he can add any fantasies he pleases, spread them abroad, and pass them off for truth, which is accepted as such and passed on by others.

*173 These, in brief, are the difficulties encountered in dealing with sources for native historical tradition. When Islam introduced [25] a written language, there was created a new category of archivists, the marabouts. They have added this duty to many others; it cannot be proved that they have purged the job of its former vices, but it may be stated categorically that they have added a few new ones.

It is notorious that, in the Sudan, the Moslem traditionists have an ineradicable tendency to transpose everything into their own mentality. Further, since a manuscript gives a kind of quasi definitiveness to the oral tradition, including all its errors, it becomes almost impossible to eliminate these errors because of the unquestioning respect usually accorded a written document.

*173 There are also the non-literate Moslem traditionists: ordinary dyeli who have been converted in the usual Sudanese fashion, as described in Chapter 6, and who have abandoned none of the characteristics of their caste. They have merely added a few peculiarities due to Moslem influence.

114 In drawing on these sources, European publications add new reasons for doubt. Most especially, because of a desire -- legitimate, in principle -- to bring some sort of order out of the incoherent mass of traditions, but also because of a need to make them fit a personal theory, the European author takes refuge in an hypothesis. Now there is no objection to this, assuming that the hypothesis on which the author bases his theories is clearly stated. Too often, however, the hypothesis is so well concealed or even so intricately entwined in the tradition that it is impossible either to discover what it is or to set an exact limit to its range. This new metamorphosis of tradition is not the least dangerous for historical truth.

115 *173 It is to two non-literate Moslem dyeli that I am indebted for the traditions concerning the Ségou and Kaarta clans. My interpreter, Soulefman Goundiamou (1), whose services as a

1. Now chief of the village of Ambidédi (Gadiaga).

guide and informant on native matters were invaluable to me, gave

538 when the action had occurred, to celebrate the glory of its
701 author. If, however, events showed that there had been mere
726 bravado, the griot was then expected to stigmatize the braggart's cowardice -- something he never failed to do, since he found it just as profitable as to celebrate the glory of a hero.

At a critical hour when the army threatened to yield to the baser instincts engendered by rout, panic, and defeat, the griot often had the fortunate ability to arouse failing courage, sometimes [317] with cutting sarcasm, sometimes by exalting the lofty achievements of the ancestors, sometimes by setting forth in a tragic light the lot of the defeated. The chronicle shows him in this role when Ma-n-son, held in check by the stubborn resistance of Tyitya, sees himself -- final disgrace -- abandoned by his wives who have decided to return to Ségou. All through the night the griot sang battle songs, and at dawn the terrible assault proved that the army had recovered its spirit.

This handler of words was undoubtedly a formidable "master." He was said to know words that kill, since he was aware of the actions dominating every person's life. When Ma-n-son's twelve wives came in a body and told him that they had resolved to return without him to Ségou because they were all the more homesick when they felt that defeat was at hand, he ordered them to repeat their words before the griot whom he had summoned. With their action thus publicly noted, he gave them leave to depart, knowing that he would be able to avenge himself for their desertion whenever he decided to do so.

The songs of the griot, retold and repeated by the warriors and the people, gave memorable actions ineffaceable lineaments. The chronicle tells us that when the expedition against Dina was undertaken, the griot improvised the song which begins: "In the shade of the bushy kaminya tree, the hen cannot tell a grain of millet from a grain of sand." This meant that, in the confusion of battle, a warrior can make no distinctions. In fact, the country was completely laid waste during this expedition, and the booty was so abundant that forever after the griot had only to sing this song to arouse the warlike ardor of the ton'-dyon'.

538 A man of high rank is always accompanied by his griot,
814 who is both a confidant and a mere factotum. It is true, of course,

538 that the griot is often a wretched character, an insignificant
814 parasite living at the expense of everyone. There are those among them, however, who carry out their duties as archivist very faithfully and who are sincerely devoted to their masters, great and generous lords in the native fashion whose interests and reputations such griot ably defend.

It is griot of this last type who transmit the reliable historical tradition from which we have borrowed the foregoing accounts. There [318] is no doubt that these griot, true "masters" (dyeli) of historical traditions, have played a considerable role in native society. Therefore their words should never be passed over lightly, although obviously they should be subjected to judicious criticism.

The To-da

614 In origin, evolution, and contingencies, the clan de-
631 veloped from the social bases already studied, community and brotherhood, of which it is, in the last analysis, only an amalgamation. As a result, its various manifestations are similar to those of these institutions, even though possessing its own peculiarities.

One of the most characteristic features of the clan is the to-da, which was the familiar term used by members of the clan for the region in which they lived. The word literally means "the pot of mush" and alludes to the essential element in the corporate [539] banquets of the fla-n-ton'. As the saying goes: "furu-ba to, to kadi, na ka ko, (at the corporate meal the mush is good and the sauce is bad.")

The to-da originally was limited to Ségou-koro and its immediate environs, i.e., the small number of villages affiliated with the ton' either voluntarily or by force. It progressively extended its sway along the Niger: first on the right bank as far as Kirango; later almost to Dina; finally it extended its influence over a broad area on both sides of the river from Kan ga-ba to Timbuktu.

This territory was organized in various ways. The key region ran along the Niger from Dina to Kirango, and the sector